

By **Darryl Fears**

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Hunters will soon be allowed to venture into national preserves in Alaska and engage in practices that conservation groups say are reprehensible: baiting hibernating bears from their dens with doughnuts to kill them and using artificial light such as headlamps to scurry into wolf dens to slaughter mothers and their pups.

With a final rule published Tuesday in the Federal Register, the [Trump administration is ending](#) a five-year-old ban on the practices, which also include shooting swimming caribou from a boat and targeting animals from airplanes and snowmobiles. It will take effect in 30 days.

State officials primarily composed of hunters in Alaska argued that the October 2015 regulations ordered by the Obama administration infringed on traditional native hunting practices and were more restrictive than what is permitted on state land.

National Park Service Deputy Director David Vela said in a statement that the federal government will defer to Alaska's wildlife management on national preserves. "The amended rule will support the Department's interest in advancing wildlife conservation goals and objectives, and in ensuring the state of Alaska's proper management of hunting and trapping in our national preserves, as specified in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act," Vela said.

But conservationists called the changes inhumane.

"National preserve lands at Denali, Katmai, Gates of the Arctic and others are the very places where people travel from around the world, in hopes of seeing these iconic animals, alive in their natural habitat" said Theresa Pierno, president and CEO of the National Parks Conservation Association. "Shooting hibernating mama and baby bears is not the conservation legacy that our national parks are meant to preserve and no way to treat or manage park wildlife."

Jim Adams, the association's Alaska director, said the state's real aim is to reduce the population of wolves and other predators to increase the numbers of caribou, moose and other game animals that sport hunters enjoy harvesting. Adams said the rule was established in 2015 when the National Park Service determined that Alaska's practices conflicted with the federal mission to protect wildlife. Reducing the predator population throws the natural ecology out of balance, conservationists say.

Opponents said the administration has "declared open season on bears and wolves" amid the [coronavirus](#) pandemic.

The rule changes have been [pending since 2018](#). That year, then-Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke issued a memo to department heads declaring that fish and wildlife management on federal land "should defer to states."

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The National Park Service, a division of the Interior Department, says it “reconsidered its prior position” after determining that the “2015 rule conflicts with federal and state laws which allow for hunting and trapping in national preserves.” Alaska permits practices such as baiting with doughnuts, grease-soaked bread and other foods to lure brown bears in some areas with federal land.

The new rules will mean that hunting on federal land will align with hunting and trapping regulations “established by the state of Alaska by providing more consistency with harvest regulations between federal and surrounding nonfederal lands and waters,” Vela said.

The move was praised by members of the state’s congressional delegation and Gov. Michael J. Dunleavy (R), who called it “a step toward acknowledging Alaska’s rightful control over fish and wildlife resources all across the state.”

Park Service officials agreed with nearly every position taken by the state. Without naming them, it cited six national parks where it is legal to hunt with artificial light, seven areas that allow hunting black bears with dogs, and four that permit bear hunting with bait.

Coyotes, which proliferated from west to east after federal and state officials eliminated gray and red wolves that kept them in check, do not generally receive the same protection as wolves. The final rule does not specify the type of bait that parks in other states allow for hunting bears.

Sen. Lisa Murkowski (R-Alaska) said the decision “protects Alaska’s hunting and fishing traditions and upholds long-standing states’ rights,” and she thanked Interior Secretary David Bernhardt for encouraging and signing the rule.

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Alaska hunting and trapping organizations also praised the move. Outside Alaska, Safari Club International’s chief executive, Laird Hamberlin, said the old rule had been “based on the subjective views of the decision-makers, with complete disregard for biological need and the expertise of Alaska wildlife management experts.”

CORRECTION: An earlier headline and the first paragraph in this story said a new rule change by the Trump administration on hunting bears and wolves in Alaska applied to national parks. It applies to national preserves. This story has been updated.